



Egypt

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

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The Constitution provides for freedom of belief and the practice of religious rites, although the Government places restrictions on these rights in practice. Islam is the official state religion, and the principles of Shari'a (Islamic law) are the primary source of legislation.

The status of respect for religious freedom by the Government declined somewhat during the reporting period, based on the failure to investigate and prosecute perpetrators of increased incidents of sectarian violence. However, there were some positive developments: actions by the courts and the Ministry of Interior that opened the door for the possibility that all of the country's Baha'is would eventually be issued national identification documents that contain a dash or the term "other" in the religious affiliation field. Also, the Court of Cassation granted a Coptic Christian mother custody of her two sons despite their father's conversion to Islam.

The Government continued to sponsor "reconciliation sessions" following sectarian attacks, which generally obviated the prosecution of perpetrators of crimes against Copts and precluded their recourse to the judicial system for restitution. This practice contributed to a climate of impunity that encouraged further assaults. Members of non-Muslim religious minorities officially recognized by the Government generally worship without harassment; however, Christians and members of the Baha'i Faith—which the Government does not recognize—face personal and collective discrimination in many areas. The Government detained members of Islamic religious minority groups, including Quranists and Shi'a.

The Government again failed to redress laws and governmental practices that discriminate against Christians, effectively allowing their discriminatory effects and their modeling effect on society to become further entrenched. On June 29, 2009, state security and police forces reportedly instigated a sectarian clash in Boshra, near Beni Suef, when they prevented Christians from praying in an unlicensed church. The Government again failed to prosecute perpetrators of crimes against Copts. For the second consecutive year, a court--while calling for legislative reform to achieve effective protection for freedom of religion and to confront the manipulation of religion--ruled against a convert from Islam to Christianity who had appealed for official recognition of his conversion on the basis of constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion.

The Government's culling of the estimated 300,000 - 400,000 swine in the country had a severe economic impact on Coptic Christian families who rely on pigs and garbage scavenging for their primary income.

Governmental authorities detained and harassed some converts from Islam to Christianity and pressured them to revert to Islam. One convert told U.S. officials that government authorities had raped her. Another convert showed U.S. officials scars from physical abuse he said he had previously suffered in detention, and he subsequently reported further abuse that he said occurred during the reporting period. A court sentenced a Coptic priest to five years of hard labor for officiating at a wedding between a Copt and a convert from Islam who allegedly presented false identification documentation.

There continued to be religious discrimination and sectarian tension in society during the period covered by this

report, and the quasi-governmental National Council on Human Rights expressed concern in its fifth report, released in May 2009, over growing sectarian tension. For example, in November 2008 a mob in the Ain Shams district of Cairo attacked and burned an unlicensed Coptic church. In March 2009 a mob in an Upper Egyptian village in Sohag Governorate attacked and set fire to homes belonging to local Baha'is. A policeman who attempted to intervene was seriously injured.

The Ambassador, senior administration officials, and members of Congress continued to raise U.S. concerns about religious discrimination with senior government officials and directly with the Egyptian public. Specifically, embassy officers and other U.S. Department of State officials raised concerns with the Government about ongoing discrimination Christians face in building and maintaining church properties, official discrimination against Baha'is, and the Government's treatment of Muslim citizens who convert to other faiths.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 370,308 square miles and a population of 83 million, of whom almost 90 percent are Sunni Muslims. Shi'a Muslims constitute significantly less than 1 percent of the population. Estimates of the percentage of Christians ranged from 8 to 12 percent (6 to 10 million), the majority of whom belonged to the Coptic Orthodox Church. The country's Jewish community numbers approximately 125, mostly senior citizens.

Other Christian communities include the Armenian Apostolic, Catholic (Armenian, Chaldean, Greek, Melkite, Roman, and Syrian Catholic), Maronite, and Orthodox (Greek and Syrian) churches that range in size from several thousand to hundreds of thousands. A Protestant (known in Arabic as "ingili" or evangelical) community, established in the middle of the 19th century, includes 16 Protestant denominations (Presbyterian, Episcopal (Anglican), Baptist, Brethren, Open Brethren, Revival of Holiness (Nahdat al-Qadaasa), Faith (Al-Eyman), Church of God, Christian Model Church (Al-Mithaal Al-Masihi), Apostolic, Grace (An-Ni'ma), Pentecostal, Apostolic Grace, Church of Christ, Gospel Missionary (Al-Kiraaza bil Ingil), and the Message Church of Holland (Ar-Risaala)). There are also followers of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which was granted legal status in the 1960s. There are 800 to 1,200 Jehovah's Witnesses and small numbers of Mormons, but the Government does not recognize either group. The number of Baha'is is estimated at 2,000 persons.

Christians are dispersed throughout the country, although the percentage of Christians is higher in Upper Egypt (the southern part of the country) and some sections of Cairo and Alexandria.

There are many foreign religious groups, especially Roman Catholics and Protestants, who have had a presence in the country for almost a century. These groups engaged in education, social, and development work.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution, under article 46, provides for freedom of belief and the practice of religious rites; however, the Government restricts these rights in practice. Islam is the official state religion, and Shari'a is the principal source of legislation. A February 2008 lower court ruling interpreted the Constitution's guarantee of religious freedom as inapplicable to Muslim citizens who wish to convert to another religion. This ruling, which is not binding on other courts, remained under appeal at the end of the reporting period. Courts ruled in previous years that the Constitution's guarantee of freedom of religion does not apply to Baha'is.

In its January 2008 decision in the case of Muhammad Ahmad Abduh Higazy v. the Minister of Interior et al., the Cairo Administrative Court noted that the country ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, of

which article 18 provides for absolute freedom of religion, with a reservation, namely that the covenant shall be ratified to the extent that it does not conflict with Islamic law.

Although there are no statutory prohibitions on conversion, the Government does not recognize conversions of Muslims to Christianity or other religions, and resistance to such conversions by local officials--through refusal to recognize conversions legally--constitutes a prohibition in practice. The security services reportedly maintain regular and sometimes hostile surveillance of Muslim-born citizens who are suspected of having converted to Christianity. Moreover, in January 2008 the Cairo Administrative Court, a court of first impression, ruled that freedom to convert does not extend to Muslim citizens. It stated that the freedom to practice religious rites is subject to limits, especially the maintenance of public order, public morals, and conformity to the provisions and principles of Islam, which forbid Muslims to convert. The Court stated that "public order" is defined as the official religion being Islam, that most of the population professes Islam, and that Islamic law is the primary source of legislation. The ruling remained under appeal at the end of the reporting period. The Cairo Administrative Court ruled on June 13, 2009, to deny Maher al-Gohary, another Muslim-born convert to Christianity, an identity document indicating his conversion to Christianity.

In January 2008 the Cairo Administrative Court ruled that the Government must issue new identity cards and birth certificates to 13 Christian-born converts to Islam (some whose purpose was to avoid Coptic Church restrictions on divorce) who converted back to Christianity; the documents must indicate that the holder is Christian and "previously embraced Islam." The court held the "recording of a conversion" from Islam to Christianity in the personal identity card does not "establish" the apostasy of the card holder. However, it held that failure to convey the holder's apostasy would conflict with public order, implying that identifying apostates serves as a warning mechanism to the society at large. The nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) Human Rights Watch and the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights warned the Government that any such public reference could subject converts to social stigma and discrimination. The Government took no action during the reporting period to implement the order, stating that it is awaiting a Supreme Constitutional Court decision on more than 100 cases filed by other "reconverts" and by several non-governmental entities that opposed the ruling, contending that article 2 of the Constitution, which states that Shari'a is the primary source of legislation, denies Muslims the right to convert from Islam.

On December 21, 2008, the Alexandria Administrative Court ruled that an administrative agency's refusal to provide Fathy Labib Youssef, another "reconvert," an identity document indicating that he is Christian was illegal. At the end of the reporting period, the Government had not provided new identity documents to the plaintiff.

While there is no legal ban on proselytizing Muslims, the Government restricts such efforts. Neither the Constitution nor the Civil and Penal Codes prohibit proselytizing, but police have harassed those accused of proselytizing on charges of ridiculing or insulting heavenly religions or inciting sectarian strife.

For a religious group to be officially recognized, it must submit a request to the Religious Affairs Department of the Ministry of Interior (MOI), which determines whether the group would, in its view, pose a threat or upset national unity or social peace. The Department also consults leading religious figures, particularly the pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church and the sheikh of Al-Azhar. The registration is then referred to the president, who, if he concurs, issues a decree recognizing the new group, according to Law 15 of 1927. If a religious group bypasses the official registration process, participants are potentially subject to detention and could also face prosecution and punishment under article 98(F) of the Penal Code, which forbids the "denigration of religions." There were, however, no reports of the Government prosecuting unregistered religious groups under these provisions. The Government last recognized a new religious group in 1990.

All mosques must be licensed by the Ministry of Islamic Endowments (Awqaf). The Government appoints and pays

the salaries of the imams who lead prayers in mosques and monitors their sermons. It does not contribute to the funding of Christian churches. The Ministry of Awqaf reported that there were 100,006 mosques and small dedicated prayer areas called "zawayas" nationwide as of April 2008. A 2004 decree by the Minister of Awqaf removed from governors the authority to issue permits to build mosques and placed private mosques under Awqaf administrative control; however, approximately 5,000 mosques and zawayas remain unsupervised by the Ministry.

The contemporary interpretation of the 1856 Ottoman Hamayouni decree, still partially in force, requires non-Muslims to obtain a presidential decree to build new churches and synagogues. In addition, MOI regulations, issued in 1934 under the Al-Ezabi decree, specify a set of 10 conditions that the Government must consider before a presidential decree for construction of a new non-Muslim place of worship can be issued. The conditions include the requirement that the distance that a church may be no closer than 100 meters (340 feet) from a mosque and that approval of the neighboring Muslim community must be obtained before a permit to build a new church may be issued.

In 2005 the President issued Decree 291/2005, which delegated authority to the country's 26 governors to grant permits to Christian denominations that seek to expand or rebuild existing churches. The decree also stated that churches could undertake basic repairs and maintenance subject only to the provision of written notification to local authorities. Decree 291 noted that governors must examine all applications for rebuilding or expansion, which must be supported by unspecified documents, within 30 days of submission. According to the decree, "permits may not be refused except with a justified ruling." Decree 291 also cancelled a 1999 decree aimed at improving the permit process for church repair. (Presidential Decree 453 of 1999 had made the repair of all places of worship subject to a 1976 civil construction code. Although this decree made mosque and church repairs technically subject to the same laws, authorities enforced the laws more strictly for churches.)

Four years after the promulgation of Decree 291/2005, church and human rights leaders complain that many local officials intentionally delay the permit process. They charge that some local authorities refuse to process applications without "supporting documents" that are virtually impossible to obtain (e.g., a presidential decree authorizing the existence of a church that had been established during the country's monarchical era). Others complain that some local authorities categorize routine repairs and maintenance (e.g., painting and plumbing repairs) as expansion/reconstruction projects that require formal permits rather than simple notification. They also maintain that security forces block them from using permits that have been issued and deny them permits for repairs to church buildings. Such practices depend primarily on the attitudes of local security officials and the governorate leadership toward the church, and on their personal relationships with church representatives. As a result, congregations have experienced lengthy delays--years in many cases--while waiting for new building permits.

On April 29, 2009, the Cairo Administrative Court rejected a legal challenge to Decree 291/ 2005. The lawyer who raised the challenge sought to invalidate the decree because he did not believe the Ottoman-era Hamayouni decree gave the President the power to delegate repair or renovation authority to governors. The Court ruled that "enlightened Islamic thinking accepts the presence of non-Muslims as part and parcel of one nation, where they can practice their beliefs freely and safely within the frame of public order, which regulates relations among individuals as well as their relations with the state."

Some communities, faced with refusal of their requests for permits, use private buildings and apartments for religious services or build without permits. Local authorities sometimes close down such unlicensed places of worship.

Constitutional amendments approved by referendum in March 27, 2007, have unclear implications for religious freedom. The amended article 1 of the Constitution states that the country's political system is based on the

principle of citizenship. The amended article 5 prohibits the formation of political parties or the conduct of political activities on a religious basis. Government supporters argued that these changes would separate religion from politics. Some critics, including the opposition Muslim Brotherhood, argued that the amendments are incompatible with article 2, which states that the principles of Shari'a are the primary source for legislation.

The application of family law, including marriage, divorce, alimony, child custody, and burial, is based on an individual's religion. In the practice of family law, the Government recognizes only the three "heavenly religions," Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Muslim families are subject to Shari'a, Christian families to canon law, and Jewish families to Jewish law. In cases of family law disputes involving a marriage between a Christian woman and a Muslim man, the courts apply Shari'a. The Government does not recognize the marriages of citizens adhering to religions other than Christianity, Judaism, or Islam.

Under Shari'a as practiced in the country, non-Muslim males must convert to Islam to marry Muslim women, but non-Muslim women need not convert to marry Muslim men. Muslim women are prohibited from marrying Christian men.

Under Shari'a as interpreted by the Government, a non-Muslim wife who converts to Islam must divorce her non-Muslim husband. In some cases, upon the wife's conversion, local security authorities reportedly ask the non-Muslim husband if he is willing to convert to Islam; if he chooses not to, divorce proceedings may begin immediately and custody of children is awarded to the mother.

Inheritance laws for all citizens are based on the Government's interpretation of Shari'a. Muslim female heirs receive half the amount of a male heir's inheritance. Christian widows of Muslims have no automatic inheritance rights but may be provided for in testamentary documents.

Under Shari'a, converts from Islam lose all rights of inheritance. Because the Government offers no legal means for converts from Islam to Christianity to amend their civil records to reflect their new religious status, the converts' loss of inheritance rights may not be indicated on civil documents.

In the absence of legal means to register their change in religious status, some converts resort to soliciting illicit identity papers, often by submitting fraudulent supporting documents or bribing government clerks who process the documents. Authorities periodically detain and charge converts and their accomplices with violating laws that prohibit the falsification of documents.

The law prescribes administrative steps pursuant to the conversion of non-Muslims to Islam. The minor children of such converts, and in some cases adult children who were minors when their parents converted, may automatically become classified as Muslims by the Government irrespective of the religion of the other parent. This practice is in accordance with the Government's interpretation of Shari'a, which dictates "no jurisdiction of a non-Muslim over a Muslim."

Government authorities sometimes fail to uphold the law in sensitive conversion cases. In the past local authorities have sometimes allowed custody of a minor Christian female who converts to Islam to be transferred to a Muslim custodian, who is likely to grant approval for a marriage opposed by the girl's Christian parents. During the reporting period, the Government, citing the 2008 amendments to the country's Child Law that do not provide for marriages below age 18, prevented one under-age Christian girl from marrying a Muslim.

According to the Government's Instructions for Notaries Public, which implement Law 114 of 1947, persons age 16 and older may convert to Islam without parental consent. Christian activists assert that ignorance of the law and social pressure, including the centrality of marriage to a woman's identity, often affect a girl's decision to convert.

Family conflict and financial pressure also are cited as factors.

The Government no longer requires religious "advice and guidance sessions" in the case of Christian-born converts to Islam. For many years, until 2006, those guidance sessions had been instrumental in resolving disputed conversion cases; in some instances, Christian girls returned to their original faith and families.

Law 263 of 1960, still in force, bans Baha'i institutions and community activities and strips Baha'is of legal recognition. Despite the ban, they are able to engage in community activities such as an annual new year's celebration. During the Nasser era, the Government confiscated all Baha'i community properties, including Baha'i centers, libraries, and cemeteries. The Government requires all citizens to be categorized as Muslims, Christians, or Jews on national identity cards. The MOI has, on rare occasions, reportedly issued documents that list a citizen's religion as "other," or that do not mention religion; however, it is not clear when these conditions apply. Baha'is and other religious groups not associated with any of the three recognized religions have been compelled either to misrepresent themselves or to live without valid identity documents.

In January 2008 the Cairo Administrative Court ruled in three cases brought by Baha'is that the Government must issue official identification documents containing a dash or other mark in the religion field. The Court noted that a purpose of filling the religion field with a dash or other distinctive mark was to protect members of the "revealed religions"--Judaism, Christianity, and Islam--from Baha'i infiltration and avoid potential dangers from such persons' conduct and relations with them. The ruling stated that anyone who adopts the Baha'i Faith is an apostate and that the religion cannot be recorded in any civil status or other official document, because that would conflict with public order. But in April 2009 the MOI issued Decree Number 520 describing procedures for members of unrecognized religious groups to obtain national identity cards with dashes in the religious identification field. In May 2009 the MOI issued birth certificates with a dash in the religion field to two Baha'is who had been involved in the litigation.

Those without valid identity cards also encounter difficulty registering their children in school, opening bank accounts, and establishing businesses. Baha'is at age 16 face additional problems under Law 143/1994, which mandates that all citizens obtain a new national identification card featuring a new identification number. Police occasionally conduct random inspections of identity papers and those found without identity cards can be detained until they produce the document.

The law provides for "khul'" divorce, which allows a Muslim woman to obtain a divorce without her husband's consent, provided that she is willing to forego all of her financial rights, including alimony, dowry, and other benefits. Many women have complained that after being granted khul', the required child support is not paid.

The Coptic Orthodox Church excommunicates female members who marry Muslim men and requires that other Christians convert to Coptic Orthodoxy to marry a member of the Church. The Coptic Orthodox Church permits divorce only in cases of adultery or the conversion of one spouse to another religion, or to another Christian denomination.

Civil statutes and religious laws--both Islamic and Coptic--prevent Coptic men from marrying Muslim women. A civil marriage abroad is an option should a Christian male and a Muslim female citizen decide to marry; however, their marriage would not be legally recognized in the country. Additionally, the woman could be arrested and charged with apostasy, and any children from such a marriage could be taken and assigned to the physical custody of a male Muslim guardian, as determined by the Government's interpretation of Shari'a.

The Government banned Jehovah's Witnesses in 1960. Since then it has, to varying degrees, subjected them to harassment and surveillance. The Witnesses were legally registered in Cairo in 1951 and Alexandria in 1956, and their presence in the country dates to the 1930s. The Government attributes its refusal to grant the registration to

the Jehovah's Witnesses to the opposition of the Coptic Orthodox Church, which has condemned the group as heretical, as well as to its lingering Nasser-era suspicion of links between Witnesses and the State of Israel.

Various ministries are legally authorized to ban or confiscate books and works of art upon obtaining a court order. The Council of Ministers may order the banning of works it deems offensive to public morals, detrimental to religion, or likely to cause a breach of the peace. The Islamic Research Center (IRC) of Al-Azhar has legal authority to censor and, since 2004, to confiscate any publications dealing with the Qur'an and the authoritative Islamic traditions (Hadith). In recent years, the IRC has also passed judgment on the suitability of nonreligious books and artistic productions. Al-Azhar has the legal right to recommend confiscations, but must obtain a court order to do so.

A 2003 Ministry of Justice decree authorizes Al-Azhar sheikhs to confiscate publications, tapes, speeches, and artistic materials deemed inconsistent with Islamic law. There were no reports of the exercise of this authority during the reporting period.

The Government has not granted legal recognition to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), or Mormons, in Cairo. The LDS Church has maintained an organized congregation in the country for more than 30 years. The Government has raised no objection. Some members, particularly those who have converted to the LDS Church overseas and then returned to the country, complain of excessive surveillance from State Security and sometimes avoid meetings from fear of harassment.

The Government outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood--an Islamist party that operates missionary, charitable, and political activities that threaten NDP rule--in 1954 but has tolerated its operations with varying levels of interference. Muslim Brothers speak openly and publicly about their views and identify themselves as members of the organization, although they remain subject to arbitrary detention and pressure from the Government.

The Government at times prosecutes members of religious groups whose practices are deemed to deviate from mainstream Islamic beliefs and whose activities are alleged to jeopardize communal harmony.

The Government has advised journalists and cartoonists to avoid anti-Semitism. Government officials insist that anti-Semitic statements in the media are a reaction to Israeli government actions against Palestinians and do not reflect historical anti-Semitism; however, there are few public attempts to distinguish between anti-Semitism and anti-Israeli sentiment.

The quasi-governmental National Council for Human Rights (NCHR) is charged with furthering protections, raising awareness, and ensuring the observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including religious freedom. It is also charged with monitoring enforcement and application of international agreements. Five of its 25 reappointed members and its president, are Copts.

Local media, including state television and radio, regularly include Islamic programming. Christian television programs are aired weekly on state-owned Nile Cultural TV. The weekly religion page of the prominent state-controlled daily *Al-Ahram* often reports on conversions to Islam and claims that converts improved their lives and found peace and moral stability.

The Ministry of Education bans wearing the hijab (Islamic head scarf) in primary schools and allows it only in preparatory and secondary schools upon written request from a girl's parent.

The Government observes Eid Al-Fitr, Eid Al-Adha, the Islamic New Year, the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, and Coptic Christmas (January 7) as national holidays.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government continued to detain, harass, and deny civil documents, including national identity cards, birth certificates, and marriage licenses, to citizens who convert from Islam to Christianity.

The Government continued to deny civil documents, including national identity cards, birth certificates, and marriage licenses, to members of the Baha'i community despite a court ruling and a governmental decree ordering it to do so. On March 16, 2009, Egypt's Supreme Administrative Court dismissed legal challenges to a January 2008 lower court decision that the MOI must issue national identification documents to three Baha'i plaintiffs with a dash in the mandatory religious affiliation field. In April, the MOI issued a decree establishing procedures for members of unrecognized religious groups --such as the Baha'i Faith--to obtain national identification documents. Previously, the new computerized identification card would only be issued to individuals who stated their religion as Jewish, Christian, or Muslim. As of June 30, 2009, the Government had not issued national identity cards to any Baha'is. It did grant birth certificates--a preliminary step to issuing national identity cards--during the reporting period to two Baha'is who were plaintiffs in the litigation.

The Government has banned the Muslim Brotherhood since 1954.

During the reporting period the Government refused the Jehovah's Witnesses' continued efforts to be granted legal registration. Representatives from the Jehovah's Witnesses' New York headquarters, accompanied by European colleagues, also visited the National Council for Human Rights, the Arab League, and others (see Abuses of Religious Freedom).

The approval process for church construction continued to be hindered by lengthy delays, often measured in years, during the reporting period. Although Government officials maintained that the President approved all requests for permits presented to him, independent critics charged that delays by the MOI and/or local authorities caused many requests to reach the President slowly or not at all. Some churches have complained that local security officials have blocked church repairs or improvements even when a permit has been issued. Others suggested unequal enforcement of the regulations pertaining to church and mosque projects. Many churches faced difficulty in obtaining permits from provincial officials.

According to statistics published in the Official Gazette, the President issued decrees authorizing construction of five Protestant churches, five Coptic churches, and three Catholic churches as of April 2009. No statistics were available on the number of permit requests made.

On July 13, 2008, Government officials in the Naga' Hammadi district of the Governorate of Qena issued an order suspending government-approved renovations of the Archangel Michael Church in the village of Huw. Government officials justified the suspension of the work by asserting that the renovation amounted to unapproved expansion.

In November 2008, the Government cited "security concerns" for its refusal to issue a permit for Copts in Mit Nama in the Shubra al-Kheima area of the Qalyubiya governorate to build a community center. Although 500 Christian families comprise the community, they have no church and desire the center in order to provide social services to their people.

The Government failed to prosecute anyone in connection with the November 24, 2008, attack on an unlicensed Coptic Church in the Matariya area of Cairo.

Following four years of government refusal of a permit to renovate the Nahdat al-Qadasa Church in the village of al-Muti'a, the Governor of Assuit issued an order approving renovations only after the church collapsed on December

17, 2008. The two-story building, which served nearly 120 Christian families, had not been renovated since it was built in 1930.

On January 22, 2009, a number of Copts living in the town of Qoussiya in Assiut, Upper Egypt, were ordered by local security officials to agree in writing not to convey recently purchased land to the Church.

On March 15, 2009, the Government's Legal Body of Experts, a judicial advisory agency, issued a non-binding report opining that the Government was not obligated to allocate land to Protestant churches for the construction of worship places in Egypt's "new cities." This report was issued in response to the case the "Protestant Denomination in Egypt" filed requesting that the Government allocate land for the construction of churches in recently developed areas. Thousands of Copts live in these new developments that are largely bereft of churches.

On April 2, 2009, security services closed an unlicensed church in Samalut, Minya governorate. The church, built four years ago, served 50 Christian families. According to media reports, the Government never responded to the church's request for a building permit, submitted after completion of construction.

Local government officials have refused to issue a building permit for a new church in the Arbaeen District of Assiut for a decade, despite a 1997 order from the President and approval from the MOI to issue the permit. The President issued decrees allowing the Coptic Orthodox churches in Assiut's El Hamra District and Burg al Arab, Alexandria Governorate, to construct new churches, but they have been waiting for construction permits to be issued since 1997 and 1988, respectively.

Local government officials in Assiut Governorate revoked a license to reconstruct the church belonging to the Church of the Brethren shortly after the license was granted in June 2001, and construction has been halted for the past seven years. Church representatives reportedly began the application process in 1997, intending to replace their church building, the dilapidated condition of which posed safety hazards. Local police reportedly halted construction after the old building was razed in preparation for constructing the new one.

The MOI continued to prevent renovation of St. John the Baptist Church at Awlad Elias in Sadfa, near Assiut, which began eight years ago. At the end of the reporting period the congregation continued to meet for worship in a tent erected in the small courtyard of the church. The governor of Assiut issued a decree for a permit to undertake renovations in 1999 that was renegotiated with State Security in 2001 to allow for enlargement. Church representatives initiated their request for a renovation permit in 1999.

Governmental authorities blocked renovation of other churches as well, including the Church of Mar Mina near Beni Suef, and the Archangel Mikhail Coptic Church in Ezbet al-Nakhl.

The courts did not rule on the March 2008 appeal of legal counsel for Muhammad Ahmad Abduh Higazy against the January 2008 ruling of the Cairo Administrative Court that the administrative agency of the Civil Status Department was not bound to examine his client's request to have his new religious affiliation, Christianity, recorded on his national identity card. In its ruling, the court wrote that principles of Islamic law forbid Muslims from converting away from Islam, and such conversion would constitute a disparagement of the official state religion and an enticement for other Muslims to convert. The court asserted its duty to "protect public order from the crime of apostasy from Islam and to protect public morals, especially if the apostate petitions the administration to condone his misdeed and his corrupt caprice." In August 2007 Mohamed Ahmed Higazy and his wife Zeinab had publicly announced that they had converted to Christianity and wished to be legally recognized as such. The ruling maintained a government policy not to provide a legal means for converts from Islam to Christianity to amend their civil records to reflect their new religious status.

On June 13, 2009, the Seventh Circuit Court of Administrative Justice ruled against Maher El Gohary, a Muslim convert to Christianity who filed suit in August 2008 seeking government recognition of his conversion, including by changing the required religion space on his national identity card to indicate "Christianity." The court stated that it is necessary for a convert to prove his conversion to the state and that El Gohary had demonstrated behavior that contradicted his claim to be a Christian. This, claimed the court, constituted toying with religion, which is disallowed. The court stated that the Constitution's guarantee of freedom of belief--including freedom to embrace a different religion--is an internal, personal matter and not subject to restrictions. It held, however, that the constitutional guarantee of freedom to practice religious rites is subject to restrictions that may be imposed through regulations that emphasize certain higher interests, especially those related to safeguarding public order and moral values and to protecting the rights and freedoms of others. The court also stated that the country is a state not solely governed by civil law and that it had approved the ICCPR--with its religious freedom guarantees--"taking into consideration the provisions of Islamic Law and the absence of contradiction between these provisions and the Covenant," which means that in the event of a contradiction, Shari'a takes precedence. The court also stated that there is no law authorizing the Coptic Church to certify a citizen's change of religion from Islam to Christianity. Accordingly, the court found that there are legislative shortcomings that constitute a failure to achieve effective protection for freedom of religion and effectively prevent manipulation of religion for personal gain. As a result, the court recommended that Parliament rectify this deficiency.

Although the Administrative Court had requested that El Gohary obtain official Church certification of his conversion, it did not accept the Church's certification as valid, citing the lack of legal authority for the Coptic Church to recognize conversions. Reportedly, it was the first time the Orthodox Church had issued such a certificate. In May 2009 the State Council, a consultative body of the country's Administrative Court, sent a report to the judge expressing opposition to El Gohary's request to change the religious designation on his identity card, and claimed that the case is a threat to societal order and that it violates Shari'a.

El Gohary was threatened by extremists, some of whom have attempted to influence the outcome of his case, demanding that he be charged with apostasy, a crime that does not exist in civil law but is proscribed by Shari'a. In February 2009, according to media reports, when he was requesting legal documents at a local registry office, a government official berated him, which incited some patrons to verbally assault and shove him, and one individual struck El Gohary with a broom. The June 13, 2009 court ruling marked the second time in two years that the country's courts ruled against a convert appealing for official recognition of his conversion on the basis of constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion. At the end of the reporting period, the verdict remained under appeal.

The Government has taken no action to implement a February 2008 ruling of the Supreme Court of Administrative Justice that ordered the Government to issue national identity documents to 12 converts to Christianity who were originally Christian but had converted to Islam; reportedly it will not do so until the Supreme Constitutional Court rules on a number of similar cases. The February 2008 ruling held that the Government must issue national identity documents and birth certificates listing their religion as Christianity and stating that they previously embraced Islam. If the ruling is implemented, some credible human rights organizations maintain the converts will be at risk of significant discrimination by both governmental and societal agents. There are hundreds of pending cases similar converts have brought with the same request. The ruling, which is not subject to appeal, overturned an April 2007 ruling by a lower court that held that the MOI was not obligated to recognize the reconversion to Christianity by Christian-born converts to Islam.

The Government refused entry to one foreigner who worked in development among the Christian communities who, with his family--all U.S. citizens--had been resident in Egypt for 20 years. The Government generally tolerates foreign religious workers on condition that they do not proselytize Muslims. Over the past 15 years the Government has refused reentry, denied residency renewal requests, or expelled expatriates they suspected of engaging in

unapproved religious activities.

In recent years, although not during the reporting period, there were reports that the Government harassed Christian clergy and other Christian leaders at the international airport in Cairo, confiscating address books, written materials, and various forms of recordable media while they passed through customs to board flights.

Anti-Semitic sentiments appeared in both the Government-owned and opposition press; however, there have been no violent anti-Semitic incidents in recent years. Anti-Semitic articles and opinion pieces appeared in the print media, and editorial cartoons in the press and electronic media. Anti-Semitism in the media continued, although it was less prevalent than in recent years. Anti-Semitic editorial cartoons and articles depicting demonic images of Israeli leaders, stereotypical images of Jews and Jewish symbols that generally referenced Israel or Zionism, and comparisons of Israeli leaders to Hitler and the Nazis were published throughout the year.

There were no reports during the reporting period of authors facing trial or charges related to writings or statements considered heretical.

On April 7, 2009, the Cairo Administrative Court revoked the publishing license of a monthly magazine – *Ibdaa* – after it published the poem *On The Balcony Of Leila Murad*, by Egyptian poet Helmy Salem. In its ruling, the court cited an opinion by Al Azhar's IRC stating that the poem was un-Islamic. The magazine's publisher, the state-run General Egyptian Book Organization, recalled copies of the issue.

In September 2008, state-run television canceled plans to show a 30-episode, Syrian-produced television series dramatizing the life of the Prophet Muhammad after Al Azhar objected because it included depictions of the Prophet.

Two private lawsuits remained pending against author Nawal Al-Sadawi at the end of the reporting period, after the IRC criticized her play, *God Submits his Resignation at the Summit*, as disrespectful to Islam. She remained outside Egypt at the end of the reporting period.

On April 7, 2008 the Alexandria Administrative Court reversed the decision of Anas el-Fiqi, the minister of information, who had banned a veiled anchorwoman from appearing on state television. The court based its ruling on the Constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion and stated that the veil did not threaten public order.

The Government continued to harass citizens for unorthodox religious beliefs. On April 24, security officials at Cairo International Airport prevented Quranist Abdel Latif Said from traveling to the United States to attend a conference. The Quranists are a small group of Muslims considered unorthodox because they consider only the Qur'an to be authoritative for Islam and discount Hadith and other traditional sources of Islamic law.

The Constitution provides for equal public rights and duties without discrimination based on religion or creed, and in general the Government upholds these constitutional protections. However, the Government discriminates against non-Muslims.

There are no Christians serving as presidents or deans of the country's 17 public universities. On April 12, 2009, the weekly newspaper *Watani* reported that of nearly 700 president, dean, or vice dean positions in the country's public university system, only one position is filled by a Christian. The Government rarely nominates Copts to run in elections as National Democratic Party (NDP) candidates. Christians, who represent between 8 and 12 percent of the population, hold fewer than 2 percent of the seats in the People's Assembly and Shura Council. In November 2008, *Al Youm Al Saba*, an Internet news service, reported that the number of Copts accepted in the National Police Academy for the year 2008-2009 was 24 out of 1,600.

As of June 30, 2008, there were six Christians (five appointed, one elected) in the 454-seat People's Assembly; six Christians (all appointed) in the 264-seat Shura Council; two in the 32-member cabinet; and one governor of the country's 28 was Christian. There are few Christians in the upper ranks of the security services and armed forces. Public funds compensate Muslim imams but not Christian clergy.

The Government discriminates against Christians in public sector hiring and staff appointments to public universities, and bars them from studying at Al-Azhar University, a publicly funded institution with approximately half a million students. In general, the Government bars non-Muslims from employment in public university training programs for Arabic language teachers because the curriculum involves study of the Qur'an.

On March 1, 2008, the Supreme Administrative Court upheld a lower court ruling requiring the Coptic Church to allow remarriage following a civil court divorce order. The Coptic Church opposed the Court's order and was reportedly considering legal options at the end of the reporting period.

The Government continued to sponsor "reconciliation sessions" following sectarian attacks that generally obviate the prosecution of perpetrators of crimes against Copts and preclude their recourse to the judicial system for restitution. In conjunction with reconciliation sessions, the courts sometimes gave lenient sentences to the perpetrators. For example, on October 5, 2008, the Minya Criminal Court sentenced a Muslim assailant who stabbed a Copt to death to a one-year suspended sentence following a reconciliation session at which the family of the killer promised to pay indemnity to the victim's family.

The National Council for Human Rights issued a report in July 2008 criticizing the Government's practice of addressing sectarian attacks "solely with reconciliation sessions and security solutions." The NCHR urged the Government to guarantee "accountability for the events; reveal the facts surrounding the battle that took place, the man who was killed, and the others who were injured; and bring the perpetrators to trial and punish them." At the end of the reporting period, the Government had issued no comment on the report.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

On October 27, 2008, security officials in the governorate of Sharqiya arrested Quranist blogger Reda Abdel-Rahman. Police raided Abdel-Rahman's home and confiscated his personal computer, books, CDs, and cassette tapes before taking him to an unknown location. Despite multiple court rulings ordering his release, Abdel-Rahman was held until January 22. Security officials reportedly subjected him to physical and mental abuse in detention, and there has been no government response to investigate and potentially prosecute the officials.

Although there are no legal restrictions on the conversion of non-Muslims to Islam, there were occasional reports that police persecuted converts from Islam to Christianity.

On December 13, 2008, airport security officials arrested a convert from Islam to Christianity, along with her husband and their two sons, ages 2 and 4, while they were trying to board a flight to Russia. Officials charged her with carrying a false identification document. The convert subsequently told U.S. officials that state security officials raped her multiple times and subjected her to other physical and mental abuse during her detention in January 2009 to pressure her to revert to Islam. Although her husband and sons were released after four days in custody, she was held until January 22, 2009, when a judge granted bail and ordered her release. Before granting bail, a judge reportedly told her he would have killed her if the law permitted. Upon her release, she was reportedly thrown from a moving vehicle and subsequently went into hiding, where she remained at the end of the reporting period. Two employees of the Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate in Alexandria were arrested on suspicion of providing her forged identity documents.

A male convert from Islam to Christianity told U.S. officials that agents of State Security had detained him on multiple occasions over several years, including during the reporting period. The convert stated that authorities had subjected him to severe physical and mental abuse; he said the officers called him an apostate (*murtadd*), told him he was suffering as a result of his conversion, and pressured him to revert to Islam. The convert stated that during the reporting period state security officers beat his wife on the abdomen while she was pregnant, causing her to hemorrhage. He also showed officials scars purportedly inflicted by governmental interrogators in previous years, including long scars on his back and sides and numerous deep, circular scars on his shoulder, reportedly caused by state security officers holding burning cigarettes against his flesh for long periods of time.

On October 5, 2007, authorities released five men affiliated with the Quranist movement who had been arrested four months before. One detainee reported to a lawyer representing an independent human rights organization that prior to June 30, 2007, a state security investigator had beaten him and threatened him with rape. There was no government response to investigate and potentially prosecute the official.

As of the close of the reporting period, the Government had not prosecuted any of the Bedouin villagers who assaulted the Abu Fana monastery in May 2008, and those who concurrently kidnapped, physically abused, and reportedly attempted forcefully to convert several monks. The armed assault also resulted in the death of one Muslim man, as well as multiple injuries including gunshot wounds to monks and the destruction of the chapel, artifacts, and some of the monks' cells. The NCHR investigated the attack, which according to independent human rights groups had its origin in a land dispute. Authorities continued to detain without charges two Copts arrested in connection with the death of a Muslim villager, brothers Refaat and Ibrahim Fawzy Abdo, despite a December 2008 court order requiring their release. Police were reportedly slow to respond to the attack, but since the attack have reportedly maintained a presence on the road leading to the monastery. The three monks abducted from the monastery were reportedly rescued by security services. Reports also claimed the two brothers were being detained to pressure Coptic authorities not to press for official prosecution of the perpetrators. Human rights advocates reported that this instance exemplifies an increasingly prevalent pattern of governmental authorities detaining Copts following sectarian attacks and either holding them without charges or threatening false charges and a police record; the detentions serve as a tool to blackmail Coptic authorities to desist from calling for official action to prosecute the perpetrators, and to dissuade the victims and/or their families from seeking recourse in the judicial system for restitution of damages.

Jehovah's Witness leadership reported regular Government harassment and interrogation of Witnesses during the reporting period and efforts to induce some into becoming informers. State security officers reportedly threatened several witnesses that harassment would revert to former elevated levels if they refused to cooperate by providing information including the identity and activities of Witnesses, including those who conduct baptisms. Authorities also reportedly confiscated literature and personal Bibles from visiting foreign Witnesses. State security authorities reportedly monitored the homes, telephones, and meeting places of Jehovah's Witnesses. According to senior international Witness leadership, however, there were some improvements, including permission for groups of up to 30 to meet, and a cessation of harassment of Witnesses in Alexandria since May 2008. They previously reported that at least three Witnesses were beaten while in police custody in 2007. Jehovah's Witnesses have reported varying degrees of harassment and surveillance by government agents since 1960, but senior international Witness leaders believed that their engagement with the Government over the past three years concerning their request for official recognition had resulted in diminished harassment and hostile surveillance.

On April 13, 2009, police arrested convert to Christianity Raheal Hemen Mussa, reportedly for possession of a false identification document. She was held for four days and then released into the custody of her parents.

On February 1, 2009, police arrested two citizens at the Cairo International Book Fair for distributing Bibles. The men were released after several days.

On October 18, 2008, in Al Fayoum, police arrested a woman and two men on suspicion that they had distributed Christian tapes and publications. The three were released one day later without charges.

On August 17, 2008, a police officer assigned to guard the Archangel Michael Church in Deshasha, located in the Sumusta district of the governorate of Beni Suef, assaulted three women who were assisting with Government-approved renovations. On August 17 and 18, 2008, police arrested six Copts who also had been assisting with renovations. The Copts were questioned and released. The police officer was also briefly detained on assault charges, but authorities released him with no charges pending.

In February 2008, the Public Prosecutor ordered the release without charges of 25 members of the Islamic Al-Ahbash sect, including three Lebanese and a Kazakh, who had been arrested in December 2007 on charges of membership in an illegal organization and contempt for religion. The expatriates were reportedly deported.

On November 22, 2007, police detained Siham Ibrahim Muhammad Hassan al-Sharqawi, a Muslim convert to Christianity, on the outskirts of Qena, 300 miles south of Cairo. She had been in hiding since 2003. She was interrogated for four days and released.

On July 15, 2007, a female convert from Islam to Christianity, police rescued Shaimaa Muhammad al-Sayed from assailants who beat her in public, but police arrested her after her father, who was one of the assailants, informed them that she was a convert to Christianity and that he had previously filed a missing persons report on her. She was found to be in possession of a counterfeit identity card listing her religion as Christianity and held on charges of falsifying a government document. The Office of the Prosecutor General, Supreme State Security Prosecution, in Cairo ordered her release on July 22, 2007, and confiscated both her original identity card and the counterfeit one. According to credible reports, after her release, her father beat her in front of the police station.

Emad Adib Atiya Suleiman, a Christian married to a convert to Christianity, remained in "administrative detention." On August 16, 2008, the Supreme State Security Emergency Court revoked a 2007 detention order that was based on "a romantic relationship between the aforementioned and a Muslim woman living in the same area." The Ministry of Interior has not yet complied with the revocation of the detention order, and Suleiman remained in detention at the end of the reporting period.

An estimated several thousand persons remained imprisoned during the reporting period because of alleged support for or membership in Islamist groups seeking to overthrow the Government. The Government stated that these persons were in detention because of membership in or activities on behalf of violent extremist groups, without regard to their religious affiliation. Internal security services monitor groups and individuals suspected of involvement in or planning for extremist activity. Internal security agencies regularly detain such persons, and the ongoing state of emergency allows them to renew periods of "administrative detention" indefinitely.

On August 8, 2007, police detained Adel Fawzi Faltas Hanna, a retired doctor and president of the Middle East Christian Association's (MECA) Egyptian branch, and Peter Ezzat Hanna, a photographer for MECA and the Copts United website. The Government investigated the two men's activities on charges including the denigration of Islam and disturbing the public order. On July 7, 2007, Nader Fawzi, in his capacity as president of MECA, had filed a lawsuit naming the President and five senior ministers as defendants, accusing the Government of failing to properly investigate the al-Kosheh incident of January 1-3, 2000, in which 21 Copts were killed, others injured, and Copt properties destroyed. The perpetrators were not brought to justice and no indemnity was paid to the victims or their families. In August 2007, police also raided the Cairo homes of Adel Fawzi and Peter Ezzat and reportedly confiscated several copies of a MECA publication, *The Persecuted: The Story of the Coptic Nation*. On November 4, authorities released Adel Fawzi and Peter Ezzat following three months in detention. On November 5, 2007, authorities arrested three other MECA affiliates under investigation for a variety of alleged offenses, including denigrating Islam. On December 26, 2007, authorities released the three men without charges.

On January 22, 2009, six Christian brothers were sentenced to three years in prison on charges of "resisting arrest" and "assaulting authorities." Christian activists asserted that the brothers were prosecuted for failing to close their café during the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan. Independent human rights groups have been unable to link the incident to sectarian motives, noting that other Christian-owned cafés remained open during Ramadan without harassment. Police raided the brothers' café in Port Sa'id on September 8, 2008, damaging the café and injuring several of them.

On December 11, 2008, the Esna Court in Upper Egypt sentenced a Copt shopkeeper to one month in prison for impersonating a police officer and trying to remove the veil of a woman he suspected of shoplifting. After he attempted to stop the woman from fleeing, Muslim assailants attacked Copt properties for which the Government ordered the payment of a total of \$230,000 (1.26 million Egyptian pounds) as indemnity to Christian business owners who suffered losses.

On October 12, 2008, Giza criminal court sentenced Coptic priest Mita'us Wahba to five years in prison with "forced labor" for officiating at a wedding between a Copt and a Muslim convert to Christianity. The court found Father Wahba criminally liable for accepting an allegedly false identification document the convert presented. Wahba appealed but remained in prison at the end of the reporting period.

On November 29, 2008, authorities released Bahya Nagy Ibrahim when the Public Prosecutor enjoined the execution of her three-year prison sentence pursuant to her September 17, 2008, conviction on allegations of "knowingly using a false identification document." The charge stemmed from her father's brief conversion to Islam in 1962. She had listed her religion as Christian on her marriage certificate in 1978, not knowing that her father's brief conversion to Islam in 1962 made her official religion Islam, according to the country's interpretation of Islamic law. On November 21, 2007, her sister Shadia Nagy Ibrahim was sentenced to three years in prison on allegations of falsely claiming to be Christian, a charge arising from her father's brief conversion to Islam in 1962. The Public Prosecutor ordered her release on January 13, 2008. The two sisters remained free at the end of the reporting period.

On November 11, 2008 the Shubra Criminal Court sentenced three people to three years in prison each for helping a Muslim woman obtain a counterfeit national identity card that indicated her religion as Christian to facilitate her marriage to a Christian. The defendants appealed but were serving their sentences at the end of the reporting period.

On March 12, 2007, the Alexandria Court of Appeal upheld the conviction of 22-year-old student blogger Abdel Karim Nabil Suleiman. On February 22, 2007, the Alexandria Criminal Court convicted him of "denigrating" Islam and insulting the President through his blog entries and sentenced him to four years in prison (three for denigrating Islam and one for insulting the President). On November 6, 2006, Alexandria security forces arrested Abdel Karim, whose blog entries had contained strongly worded critiques of the practice of Islam and Al-Azhar's Sunni Muslim orthodoxy. Abdel Karim had previously been detained on account of his writings for 18 days in October 2005. He had been expelled and reported to the authorities by Al-Azhar University for criticizing Islamic authority. He remained in prison at the end of the reporting period.

On April 26, 2009, Government security forces demolished a building the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of Marsa Matrouh had recently bought to serve as a parish social services center. According to media reports, security forces claimed a brick fence on the roof of the one-story building exceeded the height approved by local government. At the end of the reporting period, there were no reports of governmental intention to investigate the conduct of the security forces who carried out the demolition.

Following the outbreak of the A/H1N1 influenza virus, initially dubbed "swine flu," the Government ordered the

culling of the country's estimated 400,000 swine population to begin on May 1, 2009. After the World Health Organization and the Food and Agriculture Organization announced that the slaughter of the animals would have no effect on the circulation of the A/H1N1 virus, the Ministry of Health admitted, according to *Al-Masry Al-Yom* and other newspapers, that the country exploited the international spread of the virus to put an end to what it termed the disorderly and unhygienic raising of pigs in congested urban areas. Ministry of Health spokesman Abdulrahman Shaheen affirmed that the decision to slaughter all the pigs was more to safeguard public health than a precautionary measure in confronting the virus. However some observers identified a sectarian motive for the action. The Government's culling of the swine had a severe economic impact on Coptic Christian families who rely on pigs and garbage scavenging for their primary income.

On March 28, 2009, a local council in Maghagha, Minya governorate demolished part of a 10-acre Coptic cemetery, destroying graves.

On November 20, 2008, authorities demolished a Coptic social services building owned by the Coptic Church in Alexandria. Local authorities demolished the building because they alleged it had been built without a permit.

Forced Religious Conversion

On June 21, 2009, the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) made reference to a 2007 report by Human Rights Watch which asserted that in 2007 there were 89 cases of Egyptian citizens whose religious affiliation had been changed in official documents to Islam against their will, after their fathers converted to Islam. The 2007 report also asserted that in violation of the law, the MOI refused to change their religious affiliation to Christianity when they reached the age of 15.

On June 15, 2009, the Court of Cassation ruled to grant Kamilia Lotfy, a Coptic Christian, custody of her two sons despite their father's conversion to Islam. By also ruling that the religious identity of the children should remain Muslim, the Court failed to address the discriminatory policy of forcibly changing the religious affiliation of Christian children recorded on official documents when their father converted to Islam. The Court also rejected the argument of the Government Public Prosecutor that, based on Shari'a, Christian-born children older than seven whose fathers converted to Islam should have the freedom to choose their religion. The Court also stated that the children could be removed from the custody of their mother if there were "fears for the child's faith." The decision overturned a September 2008 ruling by the Alexandria Appeals Court, which had awarded custody of the 15-year-old twins, Andrew and Mario Medhat Ramses, to their father based upon his conversion to Islam, stating that "Islam is the best religion." Human rights groups observed that the Court chose to legitimize discrimination in the name of Islam and missed an unprecedented opportunity to reconcile Shari'a with Constitutional provisions for citizen rights, but the groups did praise the court's decision to leave the children in their mother's custody. The mother's legal battle over custody and alimony support spans five years.

As in previous years, there were occasional claims of Muslim men forcing Coptic women and girls to convert to Islam. Reports of such cases were disputed and often included inflammatory allegations and categorical denials of kidnapping and rape. Observers, including human rights groups, found it extremely difficult to determine whether compulsion was used, as most cases involved a female Copt who converted to Islam when she married a Muslim male. Reports of such cases almost never appear in the local media. In recent years, there have been no independently verified claims of forced conversions of this nature.

There were no reports of the forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who may have been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

As previously noted, the Court of Cassation ruled to grant Coptic Christian Kamilia Lotfy custody of her two sons despite their father's conversion to Islam. The ruling overturned an appeals court decision, which had followed court precedent in holding that her twins be removed from her. The country's highest court set another positive precedent when it implemented a stipulation of the country's Personal Status Law affirming the right of a non-Muslim mother to retain custody of her children until the age of 15, even when the father has converted to Islam and the state has consequently changed the child's religion to Islam. These positive steps were mitigated by other elements of the Court's decision, however. (See also Abuses, Forced Religious Conversion.)

In May 2009 the NCHR released its fifth annual report, focusing on the increase of sectarian tensions and recommending enactment of anti-discrimination legislation. The NCHR also urged the People's Assembly to enact a "unified places of worship bill" to create a uniform approval process for the construction of mosques and churches.

On April 14, 2009, the Ministry of Interior issued a decree establishing procedures for members of unrecognized religious groups to obtain identification documents. On March 16, 2009, the Supreme Administrative Court rejected a final legal challenge blocking implementation of a January 2008 Cairo Administrative Court ruling that the Government must issue national identification documents to three Baha'i plaintiffs containing a dash or other mark in the religion field. Since the 2008 decision, the Government has reportedly issued birth certificates to several Baha'is, documents which it previously refused to issue them. However, as of the end of the reporting period, the Government had only issued national identification documents to two Baha'is involved in the litigation.

On December 29, 2008, the Cairo Personal Status Appellate Court issued a ruling that affirmed the right of a Christian woman to be awarded custody of her Muslim children because the Muslim father was aware of her Christian faith at the time of their marriage. In granting the French mother custody, the court based its decision on the country's Child Law, which states that the protection and best interest of the child are to be given precedence in all cases concerning children.

The governor of Marsa Matrouh issued a decree in July 2008 allocating a plot of land to the Marina Church in Alamein for church construction.

In October 2008 the Government's Tanta University inaugurated a new course of study called "Coptic Studies."

On November 17, 2008, the MOI issued a decree appointing a Coptic woman as mayor of Kambouha Village in Assuit Governorate.

On November 11, 2008, in compliance with a ruling of the Alexandria Administrative Court, the Government issued a birth certificate to a Baha'i university student. Prior to the ruling, governmental agencies had refused to provide the student any identity documents, leaving him unable to register to complete his studies.

In December 2008 the governorate of Fayoum paid compensation to Copts who suffered property damage in a June 2008 confrontation with Muslim neighbors.

On January 11, 2009, the Ministry of Education postponed exams in primary and preparatory schools to permit Coptic students to celebrate Orthodox Christmas. In January 2009 the Ministry of Manpower and Migration extended to the private sector a previous decree designating Orthodox Christmas a holiday for public sector workers.

On February 27, 2009, local authorities enforced the 2008 Child Law and barred a 16-year-old Christian girl from marrying her Muslim boyfriend, as the revised law prohibits marriage before the age of 18. The 16-year-old girl reportedly had sought to marry to escape a difficult home environment.

In March 2009 independent newspaper *Al Masry Al Youm* reported that Baha'i citizens celebrated their New Year publicly without interference.

The daily independent *al-Masry al-Youm* reported that Minister of Culture Farouq Hosni, during an October 28, 2008 meeting with members of the British Egyptian Business Association, called for acceptance of "the earthly religions [*al-adyaan al-ardiyya*]" as part of the exercise of freedom of belief. The term is normally used to refer to religions or beliefs other than Islam, Christianity, or Judaism.

On April 24, 2009, the country's Embassy in Saudi Arabia celebrated Coptic Easter for the first time.

On April 26, 2009, *al-Gomhouriya*, a government-owned newspaper, began devoting a section to Coptic issues.

The annual dialogue between the Vatican's Joint Committee for Dialogue and the Permanent Committee of al-Azhar for Dialogue among the Monotheistic Religions was held at the Vatican in February, 2009.

On November 18, 2008, Al Azhar and the British Anglican Church began the 10th session of their interfaith dialogue.

On September 4, 2008, the Cairo Administrative Court dismissed a lawsuit filed by a private individual seeking the dismissal of a Cairo University Faculty of Religion lecturer, alleging that his lectures were insulting to Islam. The court based its decision on the rights of freedom of opinion and expression afforded to citizens by article 47 of the Constitution.

On December 21, 2008, the Alexandria Administrative Court ruled that an administrative agency's refusal to provide an identity document to Fathy Labib Youssef, a Coptic-born "reconvert" from Islam to Christianity, indicating that he is Christian, was illegal. At the end of the reporting period, however, the Government had not issued him the identification documents he requested.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Violent sectarian attacks on Copts and Baha'is increased during the reporting period. The NCHR, in its annual report, issued in May 2009, expressed concern over the increase in sectarian tensions in Egypt, including a March 2009 attack on Baha'i villagers in Upper Egypt. The NCHR called for new legislation to address all forms of discrimination. The EIPR reported a sharp increase in interreligious violence, both in frequency and geographical distribution.

On April 14, 2009, cleric Muhammad Al-Zughbi, a citizen, gave an address which aired on the private, Salafist-oriented *Al-Rahma* TV in which he stated: "I call upon our leader- -and I pray that Allah enables this--to annihilate them [the Iranians], along with the Baha'is in our country, in order to purify the land of their filth, for the sake of future generations."

On March 28, 2009, a mob of Muslim neighbors attacked the homes of seven Baha'i families in the village of al-Shuraniya in Sohag governorate. The attack occurred after the broadcast of a popular television talk show that included an appearance by a Baha'i from the village. Muslim villagers, some of them related to the Baha'i villagers, attacked Baha'i houses with bricks and rocks until police dispersed them. The police made no arrests. On March 31, the attacks escalated when attackers returned and set fire to the homes, forcing the Baha'is to flee. The police arrested six villagers from the mob. The incident was covered extensively in the Egyptian media. Much of the coverage was sympathetic to the Baha'is. At the end of the reporting period, there were no reports of governmental

intention to investigate and potentially prosecute the perpetrators.

The issuance by a Coptic priest of a conversion certificate to a former Muslim drew an angry reaction from some Islamist lawyers. On April 11, 2009, attorneys representing Maher Al-Gohary in his case seeking government acknowledgment of his conversion reportedly presented the certificate to a court clerk, as requested by the judge. However, the judge later declared that the Church lacked the legal authority to issue the document. It has long been the practice of Coptic priests, fearing reprisals, not to issue certificates of baptism or conversion; converts must travel abroad to obtain them. Islamist lawyers Moustafa Al-Alshak`a, Hamid Sadiq, and Youssef Al-Badri had threatened Al-Gohary and his attorneys. Several clerics reportedly issued fatwas (legal opinions) against both Al-Gohary and the Coptic priest who issued the baptismal certificate.

At least one sectarian clash was related to the construction of a church. On November 23, 2008, hundreds of Muslims attacked an unlicensed, recently consecrated Coptic Church in a renovated factory in Cairo's Ain Shams district. According to media reports, 13 police and Copts were injured in the attack. Police arrested five Muslims and three Copts on charges of unlawful assembly and disturbing the peace. All were released without charges on November 27.

Other clashes resulted from personal disputes. On December 15, an argument between a Muslim and a Christian escalated into violent clashes between Muslim and Copt families from the Al-Zarayib area in Al-Khosou. Security forces arrested four Muslims and four Christians, who were all released after a few days of detention. On December 16, security forces broke into the houses of four Coptic families and detained two men and five women, reportedly mistreating them in the effort to determine responsibility for the clash.

On April 5, 2009, sectarian tensions flared in Alexandria governorate when hundreds of Muslims damaged Christian-owned shops, hurling stones at the shops and destroying them with sticks. The attacks followed the death of a Muslim man who reportedly was stabbed to death in a fight with Coptic neighbors.

There were at least six similar incidents in Minya Governorate in the villages of Dier El Barsha, Dafash, Sila al-Gharbya, Kom El Mahras, Al Tayeba, and Abou Korkas.

Other incidents involved land disputes that led to sectarian hostility. On July 20 and 21, 2008, Muslim assailants destroyed crops and damaged a house belonging to Copts living in 'Izbat Bushra al-Sharqiya in Beni Suef governorate. The attacks followed a land title dispute involving Muslim villagers. At the end of the reporting period, police had made no arrests and there were no reports of governmental intention to investigate and potentially prosecute the perpetrators.

Other incidents involved allegations of sexual harassment or romantic relationships. On October 4, 2008, a Copt was shot to death and four others injured (three Christians and one Muslim) when villagers fought with guns, bricks, and sticks in the village of al-Tayeba, near Minya, following the alleged harassment of a Coptic woman by a Muslim man. The family of the slain Christian received some compensation, but his accused killer, a Muslim, was acquitted of murder charges on May 4.

On October 19, 2008, five Copts assaulted members of a Muslim family in the district of Sidi Salem in the Kafr al-Sheikh governorate, following rumors that a Coptic girl from their family had run away with a member of the Muslim family. Coptic Church officials later said the girl had converted to Islam and married a Muslim, and security forces banished a number of Christians involved in the assault from the village.

On March 4, 2009, clashes occurred in Dama's Village, Miet Ghamer, in northern Egypt after rumors spread that a Muslim woman was involved romantically with a Copt. A Muslim doused the Copt with gasoline and set him on fire,

killing him. The Copt's father also died in the fighting. On March 12, local media reported that two Muslims were detained in connection with the killings. On March 15, police found the body of another Copt who had been missing for 15 days. According to media reports, he appeared to have been tortured before he was killed. Police arrested several suspects who allegedly killed the Copt because they believed he had harassed a Muslim girl. At the end of the reporting period, police had made no arrests in the cases of the Copt who was burned to death and his father, and there were no reports of any governmental intention to investigate and potentially prosecute the perpetrators.

On October 7, 2008, Cairo police arrested a Copt who allegedly killed his future Muslim brother-in-law and shot and injured his sister because he opposed their marriage.

Muslim convert Muhammad al-Higazy remained out of public view throughout the year, reportedly fearing for his personal security following public death threats he received from his family and societal elements when he sued the Government in 2007 to acknowledge his conversion by issuing him identity documents that list his religion as Christianity. Maher Al-Gohary, another convert to Christianity who sued for the same right during the reporting period, also claims to live in hiding and has stated that he and his daughter have also received death threats. A female convert to Christianity who reported that she was severely abused while in state security detention fled when she was released on bail pursuant to official allegations that she procured a counterfeit identity document listing her religion as Christianity. She remained in hiding at the end of the reporting period, fearing abuse from her family and government forces.

On March 27, 2009 the Ibn Khaldoun Center hosted an anti-discrimination conference that examined ways toward a secular society. Egyptian Muslim convert to Christianity Mohammad Hegazy appeared and spoke about the problems facing Muslim-born converts to Christianity in the country.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Religious freedom is an important part of the bilateral dialogue. The right of religious freedom has been raised with senior government officials by all levels of the U.S. Government, including members of Congress, the Secretary of State, the Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs, the Ambassador, and other Department of State and embassy officials. The Embassy maintains formal contacts with the Office of Human Rights at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Embassy also regularly discusses religious freedom matters with other government officials, including governors and members of Parliament. The Ambassador has made public statements supporting religious freedom, interfaith understanding, and efforts toward harmony and equality among citizens of all religious groups. Specifically, the Embassy and other Department of State officials raised concerns with the Government about ongoing discrimination Christians face in building and maintaining church properties despite Decree 291 of 2005; official discrimination against Baha'is; and the Government's treatment of Muslim citizens who wish to convert.

U.S. embassy officials maintain an active dialogue with leaders of the Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Baha'i religious communities, human rights groups, and other activists. U.S. embassy officials investigate complaints of official religious discrimination brought to its attention. They also discuss religious freedom matters with a range of contacts, including academics, businessmen, and citizens outside the capital area. U.S. officials actively challenge anti-Semitic articles in the media through discussions with editors-in-chief and journalists.

U.S. programs and activities support initiatives in several areas directly related to religious freedom, including funding for programs of the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services that work with Coptic and Muslim community groups in Upper Egypt, as well as support for NGOs that monitor the country's media for occurrences of sectarian bias.

The U.S. Government is working to strengthen civil society, supporting secular channels and the broadening of a

civic culture that promotes religious tolerance, and supporting projects that promote tolerance and mutual respect between different religious communities.

The Embassy supports the development of educational materials that encourage tolerance, diversity, and understanding of others, in both Arabic-language and English-language curriculums.

Embassy officials also worked with the Supreme Council of Antiquities to promote the conservation of cultural antiquities, including Islamic, Christian, and Jewish historical sites.